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SUBJECT: YUCATAN SEEKING TO REMAIN AN OASIS OF TRANQUILITY

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Charles V. Barclay. Reason : 1.4 (b), (d).

**¶1.** (C) Summary. Local government officials and civil society representatives from the state of Yucatan insist their state is more peaceful than the rest of Mexico. The discovery of some eleven bodies in the center of the Merida, the capital of Yucatan, on August 28, served a graphic reminder that the state is hardly immune to violence. The business sector blames incipient security problems on the neighboring state of Quintana Roo but also recognizes it owes much of its economic success to that state's renowned tourism sector. Yucatan's Governor, Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, who just completed her first year in office, represents a new face on the political scene and has scored high points for her dynamic and energetic, however populist, approach to governance. Local PAN officials are concerned the governor's popularity could contribute to a PRI victory in next year's mid-term elections for representatives to the Congress' House of Deputies. End Summary.

Peninsular Tranquility on the Wane?

**¶2.** (U) In meeting with visiting Deputy PolCouns and Merida's Principal Officer, local government officials and civil society representatives alike were keen to make the case for the state of Yucatan being different from the rest of Mexico.

Yucatan Attorney General Jose Alonso Guzman Pacheco remarked on the state's geographic isolation from the rest of the country as a peninsula and recalled a movement in the eighteenth century for the state to claim its own sovereignty as an autonomous region. Luis Alfonso Rodriguez Compos, Chapter President of the business organization CANACINTRA (Camera Nacional de Industria de Transformacion) attributed the state's self-declared reputation to the "passive" nature of the Mayan Indians that dominate the region. All stressed the state's relative "tranquility" when reflecting on the violence plaguing much of the rest of the country.

**¶3.** (U) The discovery of eleven decapitated bodies near Merida's version of the "beltway," served a wake-up call for Yucatan state residents, compelling them to recognize their state could not remain forever immune from the ills of organized crime. In a collective state of disbelief, many Yucatan residents initially assumed the victims were from out of state. When it was revealed that all but two were from Yucatan, local residents insisted the victims must have at least been killed out-of-state until the investigation revealed they had been killed in Merida, in a house located just off the city's main boulevard, Paseo Montejo. Nevertheless, to the extent that government officials and the business community recognize that the Yucatan faces security concerns, they continue to blame organized crime figures operating out of Quintana Roo as the source of their problems.

**¶4.** (C) CANACINTRA's Rodriguez said that federal authorities sent some 130 Federal Investigation Agency (AFI) officials to complement the 30 AFI officials working out of the local office. They effectively "chased" the criminal elements out

of the state but the expectation was they would return once the pressure subsided. (Note: Rodriguez and the representatives from the Asociacion de Maquilladoras both affirmed greater confidence in the State Police than in AFI which they described as "corrupt and heavy handed." This does not square with the experience of other states that perceive the local and state police as generally more corrupt than the federal police. End Note.) Residents maintain they generally know their neighbors and can spot "suspicious outsiders." Reportedly, calls to the police department's crime hotline are way up prompting some to worry about an emerging climate of suspicion of outsiders.

#### Economy Dependent on the Outside

¶5. (U) Yucatan's economy is heavily dependent upon the U.S. market and the demands of the tourism sector in Quintana Roo.

Representatives of the Asociacion de Maquilladoras and CANACINTRA's President conveyed concern about the economic slowdown in the U.S. and its impact on local businesses that service the U.S. market. One businessman whose factory produces jeans for U.S. retailers remarked that he had been forced recently to cut back the hours for some 300 of his company's 4,500 employees. CANACINTRA's President Rodriguez who owns a company that produces yacht chairs advised that he had laid off half his work force as sales to the U.S. had dried up. Rodriguez took comfort in the fact that his more prominent business interests lay in the sale of construction materials to the tourism industry in Quintana Roo which continues to generate demand.

#### Human Rights Commission Focused on Arbitrary Detention

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¶6. (C) The Director of Yucatan's Human Rights Commission (CODHEY) Jorge Alfonso Victoria Maldonado cited arbitrary detention and discrimination as the principle abuses his organization sees. CODHEY has approximately 60 employees and receives upwards of \$1.8 million from the state's Congress. Victoria, who as CODHEY Director, is selected by Congress, described the organization as autonomous and responsive to civil society. Nevertheless, given the fact that it relies on government funds, he acknowledged intermittent pressure from political sources and indicated CODHEY takes pains to demonstrate "respect" for Congress. He described Yucatan Governor Ivonne Ortega Pacheco as a "populist" giving people what they want but doing little to transform how government operates at a structural level.

#### Environmental Group Worried about Deforestation, Water Depletion

¶7. (U) The Nature Conservancy's Marie Claire Paiz and Pronatura's Joan Andrews applauded President Calderon's commitment to forestation. However, both cautioned against accepting at face value the administration's claims that it had overseen the planting of over 250 million trees in 2007 accounting for 25 percent of the UN's target for the world. They said that program administrators occasionally relied on suspect counting techniques. They also worried that program participants were not always planting trees in the right places, threatening chances of plant survival. Meanwhile, they worried about the deforestation of vast tracks of land as part of an initiative to mine for more coal. They remarked that developers and city planners in Quintana Roo were overtapping underground water sources and warned that the region would face serious problems in the future meeting its water requirements.

#### Indigenous Community Facing Multiple Challenges

¶8. (U) Abigail Uc Canche, the Director of INDEMAYA, the government sponsored program to support the Mayan population in Yucatan, described a number of problems facing the indigenous population living in impoverished rural

communities.

-- Health: As rates of cancer and sexually transmitted diseases rise, the communities lack adequate medical facilities.

-- Domestic violence: Women and children continue to suffer domestic violence but rarely file charges with the police.

-- Drugs: Consumption is a rising problem as is the recruitment of vulnerable members of the local population with few employment opportunities.

Uc Canche described her organization's efforts to inform the local Maya population of its rights to speak in Mayan when testifying in court. The organization also seeks to promote greater respect for the Mayan culture and language through outreach programs with Mayan youth.

#### State's Dynamic Governor Scoring High Points

¶19. (U) Yucatan Governor Ivonne A. Ortega Pacheco has scored high marks for her high energy and dynamism though some worry about her populist tendencies. Although known locally as a former deputy, senator, and municipal president , she emerged from relative obscurity last year to score a victory in the PRI primary race over five distinguished peers and, ultimately, in the general election, over her opponent from the PAN party. Her personal story is almost as impressive as her political emergence. In two years, she lost nearly 100 pounds, literally transforming her physical appearance and forcing her campaign to use a whole new set of photos for her political posters. She stands as a personal testament to the physical fitness program she promotes in actions as well as words.

¶10. (U) Over a lunch with the Deputy PolCouns and Merida's Principle Officer, Ortega enthusiastically recounted numerous initiatives she has introduced to generate economic growth and opportunity and promote greater security. However, she appeared most proud of what she had accomplished with the youth of her state. She described her efforts to support the state's performance in Mexico's National Olympic competition boasting that her programs produced Yucatan state records for first time medal winners in specific events, total gold medals, and total medals. She apparently raised money from her own staff to fund the travel of some of the poorer athletes and has posted the photos of many of the state's champions on local busses. Separately, tapping local talent and demonstrating her appreciation for new ideas and "fresh

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blood," she requested local schools identity their best students and then effectively convinced 65 of the 69 to take a job in her government.

¶11. (U) On the economic front, she hounded and then charmed the Italian captain of a cruise liner to agree to make regular stops at the state's most important port, Progreso, boosting the flow of tourism receipts into the state. She is also working on expanding train service as a way to strengthen transportation flows for state products and draw tourists to Yucatan from neighboring Quintana Roo, although many remain skeptical that this project will yield net revenues. She boasted of her success in getting Placido Domingo to give a concert in front of the Mayan Ruins in Chichen Itza.

¶12. (C) Of course, some of her efforts tend to be populist and personal. She described initiatives to provide poor children with bicycles and shoes by working directly with local manufacturers. In some instances, she can't seem to help herself from thinking she can solve everybody's personal problem. Recently attending a local baseball game, she was approached by a young man selling peanuts. He told her that despite having a degree in computer science he had been forced to become a stadium

vendor when he couldn't find a job in his field. The next week she found a job for him in her office. Now, every time she goes to the baseball stadium, she's approached by vendors looking for better jobs working for her. Another 10-30 people are waiting for her when she goes home each night asking for favors. She says that when she gets tired of seeing her constituents, she will know it's time to leave politics.

¶13. (C) Security is clearly a priority for Ortega. In the face of rising crime levels, she reported that she had met with the chiefs of police throughout the state to give the police a "pep talk" and ask them what they needed to do their jobs more effectively. She was pleased with her efforts to raise their salaries and provide them with guns, bullet proof vests, and more patrol cars. When authorities discovered the eleven decapitated bodies, she immediately called President Calderon for support and he responded without delay by sending the AFI agents. She said that only four or five cops were bad and that proceedings were under way to prosecute them. When she received threats in the run-up to the state's independence day celebrations in September, she not only decided to go forward with her public events, she spontaneously decided to get down from her podium to mix and mingle with "the masses" for forty-five minutes. It drove her security detail nuts but the crowd loved it.

¶14. (C) By all accounts, Ortega is very popular after one year in office. CANACINTRA's Rodriguez reported he was "pleasantly surprised" by her performance and pleased that she had picked some apolitical technocrats, including the Secretary of Planning, to join her cabinet. Alicia Magally Nucamendi, the President of PAN in Yucatan, complained about Ortega's populist tendencies which steer her toward "give-away" programs. She insisted the state had infrastructure needs that Ortega was neglecting. Nevertheless, she conceded PRI stood a good chance of building on Ortega's popularity in next year's mid-term elections for representatives to the House of Deputies and turning around the present four member to one member advantage PAN enjoys over PRI.

¶15. (C) Comment. Yucatan is proud of its reputation for tranquillity. At the same time, residents remain in an apparent state of denial in the face of recent narco-related decapitations and increased police presence. Yucatan's proximity to Quintana Roo opens up economic opportunities for the state's residents but also exposes them to an overflow of the security concerns that plague that state. The State's Governor has scored high points with her energetic, action-oriented approach. Only one year into her job, she insists that she has no ambitions beyond being the best governor possible. However, it is hardly impossible to imagine her garnering serious consideration as a potential PRI candidate for the presidency in 2012 if she can maintain her high approval ratings and the PRI finds itself in need of a fresh face.

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